

CHILDHOOD VULNERABILITIES

in South Africa

Some Ethical Perspectives



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CHAPTER 2

SEEN BUT NOT HEARD? ENGAGING THE MECHANISMS OF FAITH TO END VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

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INTRODUCTION

In South Africa today, many children face high levels of physical, sexual, verbal and emotional abuse, as well as sustained neglect and exploitation. Families and homes, despite their protective possibilities, often remain the most vulnerable place for young children. Violence against children, either silenced or hidden from public sight, can become a normalised pattern for both adults and children with concerning long-term consequences. In the last few decades, this issue has received more sustained attention. Increasingly, evidence shows that it is imperative that both children and adults understand that children have full rights to bodily integrity and to grow, survive, thrive, participate and make their voices heard.

This chapter will explore the role of Christian faith communities¹ in ending violence against children in South Africa today, in the light of recent strategies identified by experts as effective in preventing violence. It will draw on key insights from global child protection experts in a 2018 scoping study (Palm 2019a) carried out by academic experts from South Africa who interrogated both positive and negative aspects of the relationships between faith and violence against children to offer recommendations for faith communities' unique theological role in ending violence against children, including tackling harmful social norms and underlying beliefs (Palm & Eyber 2019).

Children have not always been served well by religious precepts. The expression 'children should be seen and not heard' is an old English proverb dating from the 15th century² which was recommended by religious leaders of the day and transported elsewhere on colonial ships. This harmful legacy of quiet obedience by children who were expected to know their place, was often accompanied by religiously infused dictates that 'to spare the rod would spoil the child'. These are

1 While this article focuses on Christian faith communities as the majority faith in South Africa, some of its premises may apply to other faith communities present here and who were also included in the global 2018 study.

2 Recorded in a collection of homilies by an Augustinian clergyman John Mirk in Mirk's Festial, circa 1450.

just two ways that religious values can entangle with existing cultural norms in ways that reinforce harmful attitudes to children. In a context of violence against children, these religious legitimations, still used today by some, endanger their safety and protection.

Christian faith communities in South Africa are, therefore, faced with an ethical challenge which requires them to reshape inherited harmful interpretations of theologies still used to legitimise certain forms of violence against children. Only if this takes place, can they effectively collaborate with the wider children's sector at many levels within the child protection system to help re-orientate how children are treated. This chapter will point to the promise within child liberation theologies that can help to underpin this ethical task. This can assist local churches to place children at the centre of their faith as full citizens of the beloved community of God whose suffering needs to be seen and whose voices must be heard.

THE GLOBAL CONTEXT OF VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

The UN Convention for the Rights of the Child celebrated its 30th Anniversary in 2019. According to Marta Santos Pais, the UN Special Representative on Violence against Children, freedom from violence sits at the heart of this Convention as a violation that compromises children's rights and hinders social progress (Pais 2014:7). Yet UNICEF statistics show that half of all children globally experienced some violence in the last year with nearly 300 million two-to four-year olds regularly subjected to violent discipline (UNICEF 2017:7).

Violence against children is an umbrella term that includes the abuse, neglect, maltreatment and exploitation of children (Mathews & Benvenuti 2014:27)³. Witnessing violence as a child can also have

3 The UN defines violence against children as all forms of physical or mental violence, injury and abuse, neglect or negligent treatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse. The World Health Organization expands this to include the intentional use of physical power or force, threatened or actual by an individual or group that results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development or dignity (World Health Organization 2016:14).

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far reaching and intergenerational effects and is increasingly seen as a form of violence in its own right (Mathews 2018:n.p.). Despite their inherent vulnerability, violence against children has often been rationalised as necessary or inevitable. It can also be tacitly accepted or minimised due to the familiarity of the perpetrators (UNICEF 2017:6). Physical violence frequently begins when children are very young, first in their homes and then in schools and it is often shrouded under the ethical veneer of 'punishment' or 'discipline'. Over time, this can translate to similar physical and emotional patterns of bullying by children as forms of punitive disciplining of their peers in schools. Secrecy around patterns of family-based child sexual abuse can also travel forward into adolescent and adult forms of sexual violence. A 2018 study across 40 countries including South Africa notes that only a tiny proportion of children who experience sexual violence ever receive professional help and highlights that in nine out of ten cases of sexual abuse the perpetrator is known to the child (Economist Intelligence 2019:n.p.). It estimates the cost of this to the world economy as up to US\$7 trillion. Child sexual exploitation has been recently declared a silent emergency across Africa with particular concern around its digital aspects (Africa Child Policy Forum 2019:15).

Since 2006, there have been some promising developments around ending violence against children with an intensification of global efforts to better understand its key drivers and to develop long-term prevention strategies (UNICEF 2014:5; WHO 2016:8). The Sustainable Development Goals, launched in 2015, address this issue directly in their political targets with Article 16.2 committing states to end all forms of violence against children by 2030. Article 5.2 focuses on violence against women and girls and Article 8.7 looks at child labour and trafficking (UN 2016:n.p.). In the light of these policy commitments, the focus must be on translating this new knowledge into effective protections on the ground. In this task, the meaningful participation of children has been identified as critical (Pais 2014:8).

Over the last ten years, an evidence base has developed around what works to end violence against children (Fulu, McCook & Falb 2017:1). Initiatives like the INSPIRE package of the Global Partnership

to End Violence against Children (WHO 2016:8) offer a holistic approach around which all stakeholders can gather to bring their unique contributions. Harnessing local faith communities, especially in the key area of social norms change, has been identified as an important component of many effective violence prevention models on the African continent (Röhrs 2017:20). This is needed in the South African context to which this chapter now turns.

VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN: A MULTI-PRONGED PANDEMIC IN SOUTH AFRICA TODAY

In 1995, South Africa ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child and embodied it in the Children's Act and other national legislation. However, 25 years on, child abuse and neglect remain endemic. There is a saturation of violence in the everyday lives of many South African children (Richter et al. 2018a:181; Mathews & Benvenuti 2014:33), who regularly experience multiple forms of violence which also often intersect. A recently completed longitudinal tracking study of 2 000 children over 22 years (Richter et al. 2018a:181) shows that nearly 40% were exposed to five or six different forms of violence across the home, school or community. Recent studies suggest that over half of all children in South Africa report physical abuse by caregivers, teachers or relatives over their lifetime (Meinck et al. 2016:910). Violence against children violates their human rights under Section 28 of the Constitution of South Africa, and under the international rights conventions to which South Africa is a signatory. Academic experts have demonstrated that this causes personal suffering and a range of long-term consequences including health challenges, social difficulties and negative generational effects (Mathews & Benvenuti 2014:29; Jamieson, Matthews & Röhrs 2018:83).

According to the 2014 South African Child Gauge, the most common forms of violence encountered by children here are physical and sexual forms. These take place primarily in homes and schools

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and overwhelmingly at the hands of people that they know (Mathews & Benvenuti 2014:27; Jamieson et al. 2018:81). The severity of family violence in South Africa is particularly concerning. In a 2016 national study with 9 730 youth, one in three reported being hit, beaten or kicked by their caregiver (Burton et al. 2016:42). More than half of all parents here have admitted that they hit their children and over a third termed this a severe beating⁴. In this study, most of the cases of physical abuse resulted from punishment of children which had gone too far. Staff interviewed in this study noted that most of these perpetrators did not recognise what they were doing as abuse and that it often took place because of frustration with children who were perceived by them to be disrespectful. It was, therefore, hard to change as the abuse was seen as culturally acceptable by the perpetrators (Burton et al. 2016:59).

South Africa's violent colonial and apartheid history has left a legacy of a culture of violence still being meted out in homes and schools to women, boys and girls. Boys are particularly vulnerable to physical violence which can influence later perpetration (Richter et al. 2018b:2). It shapes negative internalisations, especially when accompanied by ethical justifications of the child's 'badness' as this comment by a young male survivor (in Jamieson et al. 2018) makes clear:

I saw him (my father) with the strap, I realised there is major trouble. I do not remember him saying anything ... He took me by the one arm, he beat me with his left hand, that's right, he was left-handed. He beat me over my neck over my back until I was lying on the floor and his words to me was 'I will beat you to death you too bad to be alive'. This had a huge impact on me, after this in a way I developed an inferiority complex. (p. 82)

4 Regional differences also exist. An earlier study showed that over 90% of male and female youth in a large sample in the Eastern Cape reported physical punishment by caregivers before 18, the vast majority with hard objects (Jewkes et al. 2010:833).

Corporal punishment (chapter 3 deals with this matter in more detail) has been identified as a key aspect of the high levels of violence against children in South Africa (Jamieson et al. 2018:82; Mathews 2018:n.p.). In many families, the punishment of children, often viewed as inferior to adults, becomes religiously and culturally justified as an accepted form of discipline. It forms part of a patriarchal household model that underpins endemic patterns of violence against children with links to other domestic violence in the home (Mathews 2018:n.p.; Miller 2019:n.p.). Child homicide rates in South Africa are double the global average. Almost half happen in the context of home-related child abuse and neglect, with children under four most at risk (Röhrs 2019:5; Mathews & Martin 2016:1160).

Violence against South African children also varies across their life span with young children particularly vulnerable to physical injury and corporal punishment, school-going children to sexual abuse, and adolescents to gendered forms of intimate partner violence and sexual exploitation (Mathews & Benvenuti 2014:29). This requires targeted awareness and interventions at key risk points in a child's development. In some areas in South Africa, nearly half of the children also report having witnessed domestic violence against their mothers in the home (Jamieson et al. 2018:82), leading to an early socialisation into patterns of violence. Economic and emotional violence is less well documented but also shapes many children's lives where a refusal to pay for basic needs or fear of being homeless requires compliance with violence.

The frequency of sexual offences in South Africa has gained global attention in recent years with the rape and murder of girl children as a particular feature of crime here. Studies suggest an estimated 40% of reported sexual violence crimes in South Africa take place against children, with one in three women and one in five men reporting experiencing sexual abuse whilst under 18 (Mathews & Benvenuti 2014:31; Jewkes et al. 2010:833). There is also a need to look beyond the graphic extremes of sexual violence only, and to better understand the prevalence of everyday instances of unwanted sexual touching. For example, one in five 15- to 17-year olds here have experienced some

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form of sexual violence over their lifetime, both boys and girls, with girls twice as likely to experience forced penetration (Burton et al. 2016:12). This is significantly higher than the global average of 12.7% but in line with the highest rates in other parts of the world (2016:12).

Community level patterns of physical and sexual violence also take place and can include so-called harmful traditional practices, such as virginity testing or male circumcision which are often imposed on children without their full consent. Legal loopholes still exist around many customary laws here, as well as social practices of underage marriage (Moore & Himonga 2018:63). For example, an estimated 6% of girls in South Africa are married while they are still under 18 (Girls Not Brides 2017:n.p.). Claims of religious freedom are often used to protect these loopholes. Peer violence in adolescence also includes child-on-child bullying and gang-related violence. Risk factors for these patterns by children include witnessing violence at a young age and living in unsafe environments (Miller 2019:n.p.). Violence against children is now shown to have long-term consequences over the whole lifecycle and can also form a vicious intergenerational cycle. In the next section, this aspect will be discussed further.

THE COSTS AND CONSEQUENCES OF AN INTERGENERATIONAL CYCLE OF VIOLENCE

Longer term consequences and costs of violence against children in South Africa (Mathews & Benvenuto 2014:29; Hsiao et al. 2018:3) include a range of concerning effects on children's emotional, health and educational abilities. Save the Children's *Violence Unwrapped* study estimated that in 2015 alone, violence against children cost South Africa R23 billion, or nearly 5% of the country's GDP (Fang et al. 2016:5). The impact of violence against children often continues long after physical wounds may have healed, with lasting social and emotional consequences across their adult lifespan and ongoing risks of aggressive interpersonal behaviour as a result, especially by boys

(Richter et al. 2018b:1). Patterns of violence experienced can be re-enacted and boys who experience violence are at an increased risk of becoming perpetrators later in life (Richter et al 2018b:3). Jamieson et al. (2018) note:

[t]here are significant, often gendered, pathways between exposure to violence in childhood and later victimisation or perpetration. Childhood trauma increases the risk of men perpetrating physical/ sexual IPV and women experiencing IPV; and of both men and women using corporal punishment against their own children ... the effects last for generations. (p. 90)

This intergenerational cycle shows complex connections between violence against women and against children in the home (Miller 2019:n.p.). These are often tied to a gendered hierarchy of power with the man seen as the head of the household, a theme also reflected in global studies (Fulu et al. 2017:2). In South Africa, domestic violence and corporal punishment are associated with social norms that reinforce male dominance and accept violence as a reasonable means to resolve conflict (Röhrs 2017:10; Miller 2019:n.p.). Strong beliefs, often partially shaped by religious texts, can lie beneath these accepted social norms. Röhrs (2017:10) notes that women who believe husbands are justified in hitting wives, and that physical punishment is a necessary form of discipline, were up to eight times more likely to report that their children had experienced psychological aggression, physical violence, and severe physical violence in the last month when compared with women who did not hold these beliefs. Young children are then exposed to physical punishment in the home (Jamieson et al. 2018:84) at an age when this is likely to cause damage that affects the whole lifecycle. It also often sets up an early punitive pattern between caregiver and child that continues as the child gets older.

Women are frequently the primary caregivers of, and, therefore, are some of the main perpetrators of early home violence against children. However, a displaced aggression cycle (Jamieson et al. 2018:83) has been identified where women, often victims of domestic

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violence themselves, can then take out their frustrations on their children, often tied to ideas of justified punishment where men are allowed to punish women and then women punish children. This cycle legitimises multiple patterns of violence and can be internalised as normal by the one being punished. Taking a gendered lens to child violence is also important to make sure that boys do not become invisible in a narrow focus only on women and girls. Abuse is prevalent among boys as well, including their sexual abuse which often remains a deeply taboo subject in society (Burton et al. 2016:32; Jamieson et al. 2018:82).

What lies beneath this culture of violence against children? Social norms are consistently identified as a key factor underpinning the social tolerance of, or silence around, certain forms of violence against children, such as corporal punishment or family-related sexual violence. These norms and silences can act as a major factor in the ongoing vulnerability of children and in the continuation of repeated violence. Jamieson et al. (2018) note:

Social norms that consider children as the property of their parents and not as rights holders can place children at risk of physical violence and promote a culture of silence that hinders reporting. The low status of children, evidenced by the widespread belief that children should not question the authority of their elders, disempowers children and leaves them vulnerable to abuse and neglect. (p. 38)

Changing the social norms and family attitudes that support violence is essential. It is here that the faith sector may play a particularly vital role in South Africa. Violence against children is often complicated by religious and cultural justifications with their roots in patriarchal attitudes where women and children can be viewed as inferior to men, and children are viewed as the possessions of their parents (Palm 2019a:36). This forms the ethical crux of many forms of violence that children face, and which also socialise them into its acceptability. Harmful beliefs that support the idea that children sit at

the bottom of a hierarchy of value and that those higher up in the chain are allowed, or are morally required to either ‘beat the naughty’ out of them as a parental duty or ensure they are married off early to prevent the religious sin of pre-marital sex, must be explicitly challenged and not implicitly reinforced by faith leaders.

PROMISING DEVELOPMENTS IN SOUTH AFRICA

Important opportunities for change exist here. On 19 October 2019, South Africa’s Constitutional Court unanimously declared the legal defence of “moderate and reasonable chastisement” by caregivers unconstitutional, effectively banning all corporal punishment in the home. This is an opportunity to shift endemic to social norms and practices in homes here.

South Africa is also placed 15th on a list reporting on child sexual violence in 40 countries. Its legal framework is identified as a significant strength, but implementation remains a concern (Economic Intelligence 2018). To tackle sexual violence at its roots, social norms around sex, sexuality and violence against women and girls will have to be transformed. This requires critical engagement with entrenched religious ideologies which place men as unquestioned heads of households and silence the women and children within them. An Africa-wide report on Child Sexual Exploitation (ACPF 2019:87) points to the urgent need to build the capacity of children to enhance their resilience to sexual harm, their readiness to report violence and their ability to protect themselves by using school curriculums to break the silence and start a sustained public conversation. This is a strategy being developed further in South Africa, despite vocal pushback from selected conservative Christian faith voices (Naidoo 2019:n.p.).

In 2017, South Africa signed up as one of 26 ‘Pathfinder’ countries as part of The Global Partnership to End all Forms of Violence Against Children and as such has committed to take public action to accelerate

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change⁵. Local faith communities in South Africa can play a potentially important role in this task and it is to this area that we now turn.

WHAT IS STILL NEEDED?

There is a need for a sustained, large-scale shift in social norms and attitudes around violence against children (Röhrs 2017:23). Laws are important, but they are not enough on their own. Corporal punishment in schools here has been prohibited for decades but remains endemic (Mathews & Benvenuti 2014:28). An ethical commitment to end violence against children must build a shared conviction that it is neither justifiable nor inevitable, and that it can be prevented (Niekirk & Makaoe 2014:35). South Africa needs primary prevention approaches that tackle a complex interplay of multiple factors and require all stakeholders to work together with a shared agenda. Two areas identified as key are: changing social norms on violence and shifting attitudes to corporal punishment (Niekirk & Makaoe 2014:37). Extreme abuse is often the tip of a larger iceberg of sustained violence that still goes unchallenged. Despite high level commitments to end violence against women and children, there remains a lack of political will to implement these (Jamieson et al. 2018:87). Stopping violence requires an integrated approach that shifts social norms and gender relations at a fundamental level and supports families to better care for children. This requires intentional interventions at multiple levels of the socio-ecological model at the same time – not just a belief in a ‘trickle down from the top’ approach (Mathews & Benvenuti 2014:30). South Africa can learn from successful community social norms change programmes in Africa that prioritised engaging with faith leaders, such as TOSTAN in Senegal and SASA! in Uganda (Röhrs 2017:24). South African child experts have acknowledged the important role of faith communities and the need to bring religious leaders to the table.

5 For more on this initiative see <https://www.end-violence.org/impact/countries/south-africa>

However, more needs to be done to make this engagement a sustained local reality.

ROLE OF FAITH IN ENDING VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

UN child protection experts Robinson and Hanmer (2014:602) note that religions contain protective aspects which can offer important contributions to the task of ending child violence. Religious actors can play important roles in both changing harmful attitudes and in providing a range of community services.

Since 2006, different faith communities have mobilised internationally to reflect on their roles in ending violence against children. The 2006 Kyoto Declaration, signed by religious leaders from around the world, committed religions to play an active role in implementing laws on all forms of child violence including corporal punishment (Religions for Peace & UNICEF 2006).⁶ Faith leaders pledged here to change theologies seen to legitimise any violence and to work alongside other sectors to end all violence against children. Since then, a range of contextual religious resources have been developed to help faith communities address specific forms of violence against children as an integral part of their faith mission. In 2013, at the 10th Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Korea, the statement “Putting Children at the Center” was endorsed as part of God’s mission for the churches to uphold children’s dignity. This included actions, such as:

- Encouraging positive non-violent parenting with respect, love and compassion
- Working with others in a global movement to eliminate child corporal punishment

6 Article 6 of this Kyoto 2006 Declaration states “[w]e call upon our governments to adopt legislation to prohibit all forms of violence against children, including corporal punishment ... Our religious communities are ready to serve as monitors of implementation.”

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- Using sacred texts to promote peace, justice and non-violence in living with children
- Building partnerships with inter-government organisations, ecumenical partners and other faith communities and networks for promoting children's rights.⁷

In 2017, the Panama Declaration committed religious leaders across all faiths to actively work together for legal, policy and social change on violence against children in their respective countries, with a focus on local faith communities playing more active roles in preventing and ending this violence (Arigatou 2017:n.p.).

However, a gap remains between global religious declarations and lived experiences of many children in local faith contexts. An opportunity exists for faith communities to play an important role in bridging this gap but if this is to take place, harmful theologies must be reimagined in local congregations. Faith communities need to acknowledge that their spaces have often been complicit in justifying patterns of violent punishment and turning a blind eye to sexual harms (CRIN 2014:5; Palm 2019a:27). This task is urgent in South Africa today.

FAITH AND ENDING VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN IN SOUTH AFRICA

Over eighty per cent of South Africa's population identify as Christian. Surveys carried out by the Human Sciences Research Council show high unquestioned beliefs in God across all racial groupings with a strong preference towards literalist interpretations of sacred texts (Rule & Mncwango 2010:186). Churches remain the most trusted

⁷ The statement in full can be found at churchesfornon-violence.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/Putting-Children-at-the-Center.

institution for the majority of South Africans (Rule & Mncwango 2010:196), making them an important social factor for change.

The South African context, therefore, offers an opportunity for Christianity, in particular, to play an influential role in ending violence against children. Faith communities can play an important role in dismantling harmful philosophies of child rearing in particular, often underpinned by the selective misuse of certain sacred texts and theological doctrines that has also shaped South African history. These need urgent divesting of any aura of religious morality, in the light of evidence that these approaches do harm both to children and to the parent/child relationship. Faith communities can also offer regular spaces for direct support to child victims and for playing a triage role in the recognition, referral and response to child abuse, if they are connected into a wider child protection system, and do not try to manage alone.

At the start of the new South Africa in the 1990s, South African theologian Albert Nolan (1995:155) called for a Reconstruction and Development programme of the family to become a place where the rights of women and children are deeply respected. And yet, over 24 years on, South Africa has some of the highest rates of violence against women and children in the world. Many religious organisations here still seek to reinforce models of the family that legitimise patriarchal power and adult patterns of violent discipline (Palm 2018:n.p.; Palm 2019b). South Africa has also inherited a problematic conflation of religion and culture, tied to a history of colonialism. This can translate into patterns of legitimised violence against children as one child expert here notes (quoted in Palm 2019a)

It is also a conflation, particularly in Africa ..., there is a conflation of “God says I must” and “it’s my culture”..., there is no history of corporal punishment of children in Africa until the slave traders and the missionaries and the colonisers arrived. (p. 31)⁸

⁸ All direct quotations referenced in this way are from Palm (2019a), a study commissioned by the Joint Learning Initiative for Faith and Local Communities at Stellenbosch University South Africa.

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Many Christian faith groups and organisations across South Africa, such as the South African Council of Churches and the Catholic Bishops Conference of Southern Africa have aligned with commitments to end all forms of violence against children. Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu is an ambassador for ending corporal punishment to counter entrenched religious legitimisations that child discipline requires violence. Tutu (2006) notes that:

[p]rogress towards abolishing corporal punishment is being made, but millions of the world's children still suffer from humiliating acts of violence and these violations of their rights as human beings can have serious lifelong effects. Violence begets violence and we shall reap a whirlwind. Children can be disciplined without violence that instils fear and misery ... If we really want a peaceful and compassionate world, we need to build communities of trust where children are respected, where home and school are safe places to be and where discipline is taught by example. (p. 11)

However, this faith mandate has not always translated consistently into ordinary local congregations. Vocal resistance has been seen by organisations, such as Freedom of Religion South Africa (FOR SA), who claim to represent 6 million South Africans of faith (Palm 2018; Palm 2019b:180). They have played an obstructive role in legal reform on corporal punishment⁹. Some of their partners have even called families to disobey the law (Baptist Union 2016):

[h]oly Scripture has clear instructions on the discipline of children ... including spanking ... It is outrageous to propose spanking as administered by loving Christian parents committed to the best interest and welfare of their children ... State legislation

9 In October 2019, a protracted legal battle in which certain religious arguments were publicly deployed by FOR SA to appeal the High Court decision to remove this parental 'loophole' in the law. Their appeal was overruled.

forbidding this would be a direct rejection of biblical authority ... we must obey God rather than men.¹⁰ (p. 1)

These conflicting religious messages, in the light of the 2019 Constitutional Court judgement on corporal punishment, create a haze of ambivalence for many ordinary Christian families. They may do harm by creating moral resistance by parents, as well as fuelling fears which may encourage parents to hide their negative parenting practices rather than to seek help. After this decision, FOR SA claimed publicly that this ruling, celebrated by local child activists, reduces the 'toolkit of options' that parents need to fulfil their faith obligations, by suggesting not only that parents should be allowed to hit their children but that they may be religiously required to, by drawing on so-called "Biblical mandates to smack" (Swain & Palm 2019).

This chapter claims instead, that faith leaders should employ their religious freedom in South Africa in alignment with other human rights to call churches and people of faith forwards into progressive social action on all forms of violence against children, in the light of high levels of family violence tied to harsh punishment. Careful contextual engagement with sacred texts, such as the Bible, rather than a literal approach, offers an alternative to calls for a return to hierarchical theologies of superior and inferior groups often inherited from South Africa's chequered religious past where the Bible was misused to justify slavery, racism and apartheid. Questions around violence against children and faith reflect an internal crisis of religious freedom within South Africa which requires attention being paid to the theologies that lie beneath these varied claims (Palm 2019b).

Corporal punishment is also not the only site of struggle between faith and strategies to end violence against children. South Africa has recently launched a comprehensive sexuality education curriculum for schools aimed specifically at preventing child sexual abuse and exploitation by equipping young children with more information and life skills. However, this has been vocally denounced by selected

10 'Response to the South African Human Rights Commission.'

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religious voices here, such as the Family Policy Institute, who term it a “diabolical plan” designed to change the sexual and gender norms of South African society (Naidoo 2019). Until voices such as these are consistently challenged publicly by other faith leaders, Christian faith may be seen as a liability by many other stakeholders working to end violence against children. This is a missed opportunity. South African child experts Chames & Lemovsky (2014:49) point to the potentially important role of religious leaders within South Africa in the child protection systems. They can play a “pivotal role” in raising the awareness and support of the public, especially in rural areas, and in challenging religiously endorsed patriarchal systems that make children more vulnerable. This call is in line with many religious communities who have recognised their important role in ending violence against children and stand together to counter a rise in religious fundamentalism which reinforces a deeply problematic patriarchal household model.

Faith-based support in South Africa can be an essential factor in eliminating violence against children as both an ethical and a religious imperative. However, the Churches’ Network for Non-Violence (2015:1) notes that this involves “changing an often deeply entrenched culture of acceptance of physical punishment and challenging those who use their sacred texts and teachings to justify it.” It requires embracing alternative ways of imagining children in South Africa that align with the 2018 World Council of Churches movement to place children at the centre of local churches through commitments to child protection, child participation and a future environment fit for children. Organisations such as The Warehouse Trust in Cape Town have developed resources to equip church workers with guidance about children, churches and the law (Palm 2018:n.p.). But these tools must become embodied in the lives and attitudes of local congregations if they are to challenge long held social norms about children needing to be quiet, punished and knowing their place that often also become internalised by children.

FAITH'S CROSS-CUTTING ROLES ACROSS THE SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL MODEL

Recent consultations with faith-related child protection experts across the world (Palm 2019a) have focused on the complex interconnections between faith and violence against children and highlighted the two areas of corporal punishment and sexual abuse as primary concerns. Lessons can be drawn from this for the South African context where these two issues are prominent concerns. The study highlighted that faith is currently a “mixed blessing” (Eyber & Palm 2019:1) on ending child violence and notes the role that religiously infused beliefs play in shaping diverse interpretations of sacred texts that can harm or help children. This reality requires faith leaders to be uniquely engaged in the task of ending violence against children (Child protection expert, Panama, cited in Palm 2019a):

We need to involve faith leaders not only because they are influential but first and foremost because of underlying beliefs ... in many cases there are underlying beliefs and social norms and values that are somehow highlighted in or by the religious sector that need to be changed. (p. 29)

Two insights can be particularly valuable for South Africa. The study suggests that faith leaders can play important roles at each level of the socio-ecological model used by child protection experts in South Africa (Mathews & Benvenuti 2014) to address violence against children. It also highlights the cross-cutting “spiritual capital” role that faith can uniquely play (Palm & Eyber 2019). This is depicted in the diagram below:

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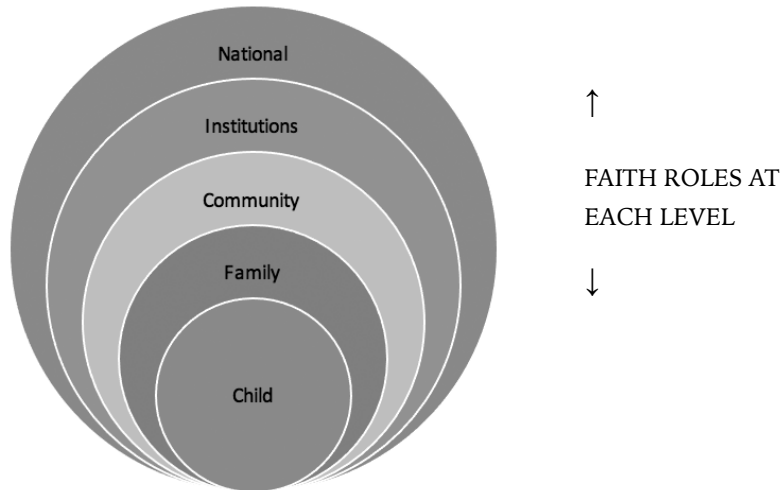


Diagram based on insights from Palm 2019a:17.

Faith communities can contribute at all levels of this model and play multiple roles across the child protection system to both prevent and respond to violence against children. However, child protection experts need to assist them to develop minimum standards of care and to build capacity to prevent and respond to violence effectively. Faith communities can provide care at a low cost but need to support families and children among themselves. Faith leaders can engage formal child protection systems and have crucial roles to play in the prevention of and referral of child abuse.

At the level of the child, faith communities can ensure that children are both seen and heard by creating regular spaces for their voices within child-friendly churches, and by engaging with sacred texts and traditions through a child-centred lens to ensure that they do no harm. These offer opportunities for meaningful child participation, identified as a key mechanism for sustainably changing social norms. However, faith responses must also move away from merely rescue and rehabilitation approaches to nurturing child-centred approaches that link protection and participation, and equip children as active agents who can be empowered as recent evidence has highlighted (Eyber &

Palm 2019:4). Faith leaders in South Africa do not have to be child protection experts to play an important role in protecting, recognising, and referring children identified as at-risk. Sunday schools and church youth programmes can also engage children directly around their innate value tied to the primary prevention of abuse, and offer a safe space to report child abuse rather than becoming havens for adult abusers to hide as recent reports have highlighted (CRIN 2014). Children can experience feelings of guilt and shame when abused, especially sexually. Faith communities can develop new ways to help children understand that they are not to blame and that their bodies belong to them. This will, however, involve tackling historic taboos on discussing sex within religious spaces. Faith communities can also play a role in building resilience in children as a regular presence through childhood and in supporting their safe nurture and their human dignity:

[T]he real thing that we need to do is change childhood to being a place where children are nurtured and cared for and helped to grow to their full potential. Not beaten, denigrated, put down and humiliated and made to feel small and stupid and useless. (Interview with child expert in South Africa, cited in Palm 2019a:180)

At a family level, faith can offer practical hope and support rather than legitimise harms or ignore children's needs. Eyber & Palm (2019:2) note that religious leaders have unique trusted access to family life. They can play a critical role in identifying children at risk or victims of violence. They can potentially act as interlocutors between the child and potential perpetrators, raising awareness about child rights and caretaker obligations (:8). Religious leaders can also play a role in engaging perpetrators within religious frames of reference and offering counselling and accountability, using their ethical and spiritual authority in the lives of families to help perpetrators of violence against children to understand and change their patterns.

Families have significant potential to protect children from harm and give them a safe container, as well as forming a socialising container

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for society. However, in the light of the unsafety often experienced by children within the family unit, it needs to be critically engaged. Faith leaders can offer targeted support to families to change harsh parenting practices, end corporal punishment and build nurturing relations of trust across the child's life span:

(O)ne of the most important roles that churches can play, or faith groups can play is prevention. They can support new parents, they can support parenting by helping people, parenting is a difficult thing to do ... there is no manual of how to do this ... If parents can be supported ... to create nurturing and caring environments for themselves and their children, then we will go a long way to preventing abuse and neglect. I think that is a key role. (Interview with child expert South Africa, quoted in Palm 2019a:17)

At a community level, faith leaders have influence in reshaping harmful social norms, and in increasing protective factors within the community. They need to make concrete links into the wider system to ensure a coordinated response that engages with other agencies rather than seeking to be the solution on their own. They can, however, provide important, informal roles to bridge the gap between a child and the formal system. Faith communities can also look out for particularly vulnerable children, such as those with disabilities, migrants or orphans, and form a safety net for vulnerable children who may fall through other formal systems of care.

At national and international levels, faith leaders can also join together to support, rather than resist, legal reforms around ending violence against children as seen, for example, in the Churches' Network for Non-Violence (2015). They can help hold governments accountable for acting on their policy commitments and as transnational communities of faith they can align with global commitments and be held accountable by the wider faith community. Faith leaders in South Africa can help provide needed moral authority to end violence against children by making a sustained contribution at multiple levels of the

socio-ecological system that surrounds children rather than focusing on parental rights at the expense of the needs of children.

A second key insight of the scoping study was that although there are many ways in which faith communities can play important roles at each level of the socio-ecological model, the cross-cutting, unique contribution of spiritual capital is critical. Its religious resources and mechanisms of faith in the form of doctrines, practices, rituals, experiences and structures within faith traditions can play a very important role in the formation of protective norms, beliefs and attitudes about how children are seen and treated. Faith communities should not just be instrumentalised to access communities, run programmes and implement projects, but be supported to develop their spiritual capital for children: an area which is often still overlooked (Palm & Eyber 2019). Eyber & Palm (2019) note, however, that faith can also be complicit in certain forms of violence against children. This needs to be publicly challenged in the South African context if greater trust is to be forged between faith organisations and the wider children's sector. According to Eyber and Palm, harmful religious beliefs and a misuse of selected Biblical texts can

(a)ssign children to a position of inferiority in comparison to adults, with fewer social rights and less legal protection. This is a root cause of violence against children. Faith communities must take responsibility for their role in perpetuating these norms and take active steps to challenge and change this. (p. 1)

Faith-based approaches could instead develop positive connections between child protection and faith by using a child rights lens that connects to religious themes and enables sacred text reflections on dignity, justice and peace with children involved as a central part of these reflections. Faith communities can also help develop alternative religious and cultural rituals that do not endorse harmful practices but place the best interests of the child at the centre. These can range from a zero-tolerance policy by all religious leaders on issues, such as child marriage, to the use of baptismal rituals and family counselling

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spaces to reinforce positive parenting and challenge existing religious justifications of negative practices, such as corporal punishment. Religious structures can engage with and share alternative sacred text reinterpretations and rituals with their adherents and help equip faith leaders at their formation stages to think about children as congregants and as citizens of the kingdom of God. It is to this unique theological task in challenging overarching harmful beliefs and promoting positive beliefs, in specific relation to ending violence against children that the final part of this chapter will now turn.

WHEN FAITH DOES VIOLENCE TO CHILDREN

Ancient sacred texts take patriarchy (the ‘rule of the fathers’) for granted. As a result, literal readings of these texts today can be highly damaging for children (as well as for women and other marginalised groups). There is a tendency to make children voiceless, invisible and the property of their parents. As a result, harms to children within sacred texts often remain hidden and can even be justified. The Biblical stories of Abraham and Isaac (Gn 22), of Jephthah’s daughter (Jdg 11), Tamar’s rape (2 Sm 13) and even the story of Jesus himself (Mt 2) all contain descriptions of extreme forms of violence against children and hint at the fear it creates for those children. At the root of much abuse of children in South Africa today, lie entrenched social norms that perpetuate hierarchical ways of viewing children as patriarchal property. This places adults in a superior position over children and makes vulnerable children more voiceless and invisible. Local faith communities must critically re-interrogate these traditions in the light of their ethical obligations to children today to ensure that they are seen and heard. Church complicity in the physical and sexual abuse of children is emerging all over the world, including in South Africa. Abusers here must be systematically held to account. In an interview with a South African child expert, the following opinion was expressed (in Palm 2018):

The church needs to take responsibility for its own complicity ... a long, terrible history of abusing children ... (T)o the extent that faith organisations do not stand up against violence against women and children, they are part of the problem. (p. 27)

Underpinning entrenched patterns of children not being seen or heard can be harmful beliefs that tell children that they are bad, mere objects or adult property. These fuel the root cause of violence against children by presenting them as ‘less than’ adults. This can be especially strong in contexts like South Africa that are deeply shaped by Calvinism and a history of religious family national education scripts that often support both a literal belief in hell and a strong sense of being born bad (into original sin). Faith leaders must take an active role in challenging damaging ways of understanding punishment through the lens of a violent, angry patriarchal God figure if they are to play a role in building a human rights culture that includes children. In an interview in 2018, a South African child expert noted (in Palm 2019):

The way that certain patriarchal religions conceive the world is that there is a hierarchy ... someone at the top ... in charge, they are punitive, powerful, in control and if you don’t do what they say you are going to get thumped in one way or another ... the church and parenting needs to move away from punishment to discipline ... Faith groups should be helping parents see that and raise their children in caring, nurturing environments. (p. 29)

Certain theological themes reoccur in discussions of faith’s complicity in violence against children. These include an *angry and punitive God*, *eternal damnation*, and the *inherently sinful nature of humans*. These are used to instil fear and guilt in children or in their parents (Rutledge & Eyber 2019; Palm 2019a). When children are viewed religiously as small creatures whose will needs to be “broken” by their parents, Scripture becomes a source of harm and needs reinterpretation (Trofgruben 2018:57). Religious belief systems often shape what many adults believe is best for their children because they see it as God’s

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will. This can become entangled with cultural norms and has to be tackled directly by faith leaders. South Africa also has complex slave owning, colonial and apartheid histories which have invoked God to seek to justify violence against groups that have been seen as ‘less than’ or subordinate.

Theologian Trofgruben (2018) highlights that God is still invoked today to justify some child violence and must be named, like apartheid, as a blasphemous reading of sacred texts. He notes:

[w]here biblical interpretations endorse hatred, abuse, or violence against other human beings created in God’s image, especially the most vulnerable and powerless, such readings become acts of blasphemy. They contradict the spirit of the One who taught love for the neighbour, welcome to the child, and special divine concern for “little ones,” wherever and whoever they may be. Such acts take God’s name in vain, justifying violence against the most vulnerable among us. (p. 56)

A vision of God as both judgementally punitive and mercifully loving can provide religiously legitimated underpinnings for the ethical role that the parent is expected to play in relation to their child. In the light of harsh parenting practices that lead to abuse, these parental motifs need to be rethought with an interpretive key to which the final section of this chapter will turn.

TOWARDS A LIBERATING THEOLOGY FOR CHILDREN

Craig Nesson (2018:12) notes that “child liberation theology takes seriously the research and social analysis that conclusively demonstrates the serious and lasting harm done to children through these forms of oppression.” Ryan Stollar (2017) points out that ignoring children’s suffering is often shaped by a philosophy of “adultism” where faith beliefs are seen from an adult perspective rather than paying attention

to whether they are liberating for children. He suggests that faith communities can, however, work together to dismantle systematic prejudice and discrimination against children in and outside the church. To do this, they must lift up the voices of children and engage them in meaningful participation (Stollar 2017:n.p.; Eyber & Palm 2019:3). This involves reclaiming the invisible or silenced voices of children within sacred texts and in their interpretations. Children must be both seen and heard in all spaces.

At the heart of reshaping attitudes and behaviours that often lie beneath violence against children in South Africa, is a shift away from hierarchical relationships of fearful respect, ownership and power over children seen as second class persons who are 'less than' to instead build trusting relationships of child nurture and growth. These can open spaces for children to participate as citizens in families, communities and nations and enable them to speak up without fear of punishment. Ingrained notions of one-way respect and obedience shaped by religious and cultural scripts will need to be recalibrated to shape new patterns of mutual respect and listening between adults and children within a shared container of doing no harm.

This need for a liberation theology for the child is not a new idea. As early as the 1970s, Janet Pais was identifying children as an oppressed group who are inherently disadvantaged due to their lack of access to power or resources that is equal to the adults around them and because they can also be socialised into normalising the violence around them. She (Pais 1971) notes:

The case of children as an oppressed group is unique ... An outstanding feature of their oppression is that their feelings and perceptions of reality are often denied; abused children are often denied the ability to know what is happening to them or that it could possibly be any other way. (p. 17)

Christians need to find ways to reimagine God as Child and not only as Father or Parent in order to speak about God from the lived experience of suffering children (Pais 1971:16; Nesson 2018:7). This

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requires refusing to read faith traditions and texts through the eyes of adults only but also paying close attention to how they are seen from a child's perspective. Surfacing and elevating the silenced and unheard voices of children in this respect, both within sacred texts and in today's society, are brought together. Seeing children as created in the image of God, forms an important part of respecting their bodily and emotional integrity. Here, 'God as Child', seen most clearly in the incarnation of God in Jesus, becomes an interpretive key for reimagining all theology from the vantage point of child suffering and for exploring what is good for children as full persons in the eyes of God (Pais 1971:23; Nesson 2018:12).

A child liberation theology has been developed further by a number of Western scholars in ways that are beyond the scope of this chapter to explore¹¹. But their insights need to go beyond the Northern academic world into the lived embodiment in South Africa in the light of high levels of child violence here (Nesson 2018:12). This theological reorientation has radical implications for reimagining the core stories of Christian tradition through the eyes of the children who suffer in some of those stories and it may be a sobering task. It will also require reflecting far more critically on interpretations of the atonement that emphasise an angry parent God punishing a son to instead centre on the core belief that God comes as a vulnerable child and that "when we receive a child in Christ's name, we receive Christ ... we receive God the Child incarnate" (Pais 1971:23).

Jesus himself extended a warm welcome of open access to children which was at odds with many of his own followers and also transgressed the social norms of his day (Nesson 2018:11). We should not see this as a glorification of childhood purity and innocence but as a placing of those from the very bottom of his society into the centre of faith. Jesus placed children at the centre of his new vision of a beloved community and warned of dire consequences to those

11 Scholars in this area include David Jensen, Joyce Mercer, Marcia Bunge and Bonnie Miller McLemore, and they provide helpful suggestions. However, they all sit within Anglo-American contexts. The need is for more South African liberation theologians to do this work and connect it to the specific challenges of violence against children here.

that harm children. Nesson points out that Jesus related to children as full persons, enabling them to approach him safely, be touched with tenderness and to leave blessed, saying to his followers “[t]ruly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it. And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them” (Mark 10:15-16). This offers a way to reimagine theology (Nesson 2018:12), a point also reinforced by the Churches’ Network for Non-Violence (2015) who played an important role in South Africa:

(A)ll recorded encounters between Jesus and children were kind, gentle and respectful with children seen as central to the new social order that Jesus initiated. By blessing and laying his hands on children, Jesus received children as people in their own right and gave them status, respect and dignity. (p. 3)

At the centre of Christian faith, is the confession that God experienced human life, including the early terrors of a refugee childhood at risk of violent death. This God then not only welcomes children but makes the child a sacrament of the kin-dom or community of God and insists that it is only when adults honour and respect children and identify with the child in themselves that they can know how to participate in kin-dom existence (Nesson 2018:12). The theme of a pilgrim child is used by theologian David Jenson to view children as offering unique gifts to adults which must be respected in all their “graced vulnerability” (2005:44).

Jesus makes the child’s status the touchstone for Christians seeking abundant life. If we take seriously Jesus’ words to receive each child in his name as Christ, then all Christians share responsibility for the fate of all children (Nesson 2018:13). This child-centred theology has practical implications for child protection and for freedom from child abuse and violence (Stollar 2017). But it requires radical revisions to many traditional interpretations of some scriptures and traditions that can, if taken literally, support the denigration of the status of children. Theologies of original sin, the fourth commandment to

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“obey your parents” and some ancient parenting proverbs need critical revision if children are to belong fully within the life-giving shalom of God. Questions will need to be engaged in new ways to make this real for congregations. For example, what violence does Jesus witness as a child where an edict is made for his child death before the age of two? He grows up, however, not to become a king, gang leader or warlord, but an adult victim of more political and religious violence. How do we re-imagine the images of God that lie beneath our sacred stories about a God who comes not as a mighty warrior but as a vulnerable boy-child? What might it mean to see the Holy Spirit re-imagined as a little girl child full of graced vulnerability who is skipping and dancing along laughing at the creation of the world? South African faith leaders have an important theological task if their beliefs are to help prevent and not enable violence or domination over children.

CONCLUSION

Many South African faith leaders have a proud history of developing liberation theologies to challenge the harmful theological underpinning of racism and apartheid. This took place in the light of sobering failures of many churches to challenge theologically legitimised, yet harmful racial categorisations of white people as superior to black people, under both apartheid and colonialism. At the start of the new dispensation, many of these liberational voices called for the churches to play an active role in building a human rights culture in South Africa. The family and violence in society were two key areas of engagement identified in the 1990s as needing new liberating theologies if the rights of women and children were to be respected.

However, if faith communities in South Africa are to play this role in ending all violence against children, its faith leaders will need to reject theological interpretations that do harm to children and publicly name them as blasphemous. Only then can they nurture liberating theologies that reimagine faith through the eyes of those children

experiencing violence. In this way, they offer what Dutch scholar of religion Gerrie Ter Haar has termed positive spiritual capital that mobilises their unique cross-cutting resources across the legal, political and civil society spaces. This is a theological-ethical contribution to making ending all violence against children a reality, in ways envisaged by the 2018 World Council of Churches movement for child-friendly churches that places child protection, child participation and a world fit for them at their heart. As an interview with a South African child protection expert notes (cited in Palm 2019a):

(T)here are a huge number of people for whom their faith is a critically important part of their lives ... it is the role of leaders within different faiths to set an example above all else but also to talk about things like respect for human dignity, appreciation of diversity, your obligations, we all have rights ... We need churches and faith leaders to search their texts and hearts for ways to make humankind nicer to each other. To forget about power and control and dominance. (p. 23)

This chapter has suggested ways in which religious leaders in South Africa can play a role across many areas of the child protection system but especially around primary prevention at child, family and community levels. They can use special spiritual occasions, such as childbirth, baptism or marriage, to provide new and existing parents with information on abuse and neglect, and to incorporate messages around the protection of children. They can offer ongoing pastoral support for overstretched caregivers and connect them to informal support or formal services. Opportunities for parents to share their challenges and accomplishments and to support each other in positive parenting without resorting to violence can also be rooted in faith communities. Theologians must explore how diverse forms of violence against children are understood in their faith traditions and highlight sacred texts and teachings that can promote the protection of children from abuse and neglect, as well as challenging those that still do harm.

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Christian theologies must become liberating for all children if churches are to become spaces of freedom for the most vulnerable in society. These beliefs can then help churches to play their unique spiritual role in the shared struggle to end violence against children. If all local churches consistently dismantle harmful beliefs that legitimise any violence against children, and instead witness to and enact a theology that places the dignity and personhood of every child at the centre of their followers' faith and ethics, they will play a unique and important role. But these beliefs need active embodiment in the hearts, minds and hands of all those of faith living on South African soil and not just in the abstract proclamations of its senior faith leaders. Only in this way, can our legal skeletons for protecting children from violence take flesh in the homes, families, streets, schools, churches and communities where it really matters. 2020 marks the 30th anniversary of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child but many of these child rights still need to take firm root on South African soil. In the words of former South African President Nelson Mandela in 2002, "[w]e owe our children – the most vulnerable citizens in society – a life free from violence and fear" (Mandela 2002:ix).

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CHAPTER 3

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